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## DISCUSSION AND CORRESPONDENCE

### PERCY GRAINGER AND PRIMITIVE MUSIC

I HAVE often thought that one of the surest tests of a true musical instinct is the ability to sense melody and rhythm in the music of primitive peoples. The frequent presence of such disturbing elements as unfamiliar intonations, a too forceful handling of the voice, loud and monotonous drum or rattle accompaniments, and interspersed whoops prevent many a supposed lover of music, many an individual blessed with all the endowments of "musicianship" from perceiving the pure gold that lies buried only a little below the surface. In the measure that spontaneous esthetic appreciation is independent of the bias determined by the conventional garb of art must such appreciation be deemed sincere and sound. Thousands of "art lovers" accept without question second and third rate productions, provided they be dressed in the usual accoutrements of art, who would shrink from a masterpiece treated in a totally different style. Hence it is not, as a rule, the musical amateur, learned or unlearned, who is the most ready to acknowledge the profoundly musical quality of much of the music of primitive folk, but rather the musical creator, the composer, whose musical learning does not sit so heavily on him as to crush his instinctive appreciation of the beautiful wherever and however it may be found. The case in music is precisely analogous to that in primitive plastic art. The layman who talks glibly of Rembrandts and Dürers would fain have us believe his soul is being constantly bathed in art, yet he finds some exquisite bit of West Coast Indian art merely "interesting" (generally a pretentious way of saying "funny") where the genuine artist frankly says "beautiful" or "great."

And so we need not be surprised to find a Debussy rejoicing in the exotic fragrance of Javanese music or, to come nearer home, a MacDowell or Cadman finding frank inspiration in the tunes of the American Indian. There is, however, a gap between such esthetic appreciation and the laborious field and laboratory study of primitive music undertaken by the musical ethnologist. The interest of a MacDowell and of a von Hornbostel do not readily or, at any rate, frequently combine. Hence my keen gratification at coming across an example of this potentially rare bird only recently, in looking through the July, 1915, number (vol. 1, no. 3) of *The Musical Quarterly* (published by G. Schirmer, New York

and London). The purpose of this note is to call the attention of ethnologists who are interested in primitive music to a paper by the Australian composer Percy Grainger on "The Impress of Personality in Unwritten Music" (pp. 416-435). Grainger is well known in the musical world both as pianist and as orchestral composer; he is particularly noteworthy for his daring and extensive use in his orchestral scores of such unusual instruments as the guitar and xylophone. In the article referred to Grainger shows himself to be not merely a cultivated musician who is half-condescendingly disposed to take from the storehouse of folk and primitive music a hint or two for his own purposes but, on the contrary, an enthusiastic and painstaking collector of such music who freely acknowledges the complexity of the problem, and is convinced of the necessity of studying with all seriousness the subtleties of intonation and rhythm which such music presents. Grainger's ideal falls nowise short of that of the scientific ethnologist. And his sympathetic understanding of the primitive background again creates a common bond with the professed student of primitive culture. I shall be content, for the rest, to let Grainger speak for himself, so as to give the reader of the *American Anthropologist* some idea of how a topic near to him strikes one of the foremost of English-speaking composers.

Symptomatic of the general attitude of the musical routinier towards the objective study of all music but that of the academy is the following (p. 433):

Experience of primitive music is not in any way thrust upon the budding musician. When I was a boy in Frankfort my teacher wanted me to enter for (I think it was) the Mendelssohn Prize for piano playing, and I remember asking him: "If I should win, would they let me study Chinese music in China with the money?" And his reply: "No, they don't give prizes to idiots."

The most enthusiastic interpreter of primitive life could hardly do greater justice than Grainger to the superior possibility of individual participation in art among primitive communities than in our own. He says (p. 418):

With regard to music, our modern Western civilization produces, broadly speaking, two main types of educated men. On the one hand the professional musician or leisured amateur-enthusiast who spends the bulk of his waking hours making music, and on the other hand all those many millions of men and women whose lives are far too overworked and arduous, or too completely immersed in the ambitions and labyrinths of our material civilization, to be able to devote any reasonable proportion of their time to music or artistic expression of any kind at all. How different from either of these types is the bulk of uneducated and

"uncivilized" humanity of every race and color, with whom natural musical expression may be said to be a universal, highly prized habit that seldom, if ever, degenerates into the drudgery of a mere means of livelihood. . . . Now primitive modes of living, however terrible some of them may appear to some educated and refined people, are seldom so barren of "mental leisure" as the bulk of our civilized careers.

Of the complexity of "unwritten" music and of the incapacity of the general public, through sheer ignorance, to fathom and enjoy this complexity, Grainger remarks (p. 417):

While so many of the greatest musical geniuses listen spellbound to the unconscious, effortless musical utterances of primitive man, the general educated public, on the other hand, though willing enough to applaud adaptations of folk songs by popular composers, shows little or no appreciation of such art in its unembellished original state, when, indeed, it generally is far too complex (as regards rhythm, dynamics, and scales) to appeal to listeners whose ears have not been subjected to the ultra-refining influence of close association with the subtle developments of our latest Western art-music. . . . As a rule folk-music finds its way to the hearts of the general public and of the less erudite musicians only after it has been "simplified" (generally in the process of notation by well-meaning collectors ignorant of those more ornate subtleties of our notation alone fitted for the task) out of all resemblance to its original self.

The following is of interest to the folk-psychologist, though personally I am inclined to believe that Grainger may go too far in his generalization (p. 423):

The whole art [of folk and primitive music] is in a constant state of flux; new details being continually added while old ones are abandoned. These general conditions prevail wherever unwritten music is found, and though I may never have heard Greenland or Red Indian music I feel pretty confident that as long as it is not too strongly influenced by the written music of our Western civilization it will evince on inspection much the same general symptoms as those displayed by the folk-music of British, Russian or Scandinavian peasants, or by natives of the South Seas, and we may always be sure that the singing of (let us say) an unsophisticated Lincolnshire agriculturalist of the old school will in essentials approximate more closely to that of Hottentots or other savages than it will to the art-music of an educated member of his own race living in a neighboring town.

My own experience would lead me rather to emphasize the quite definite stylistic peculiarities of the folk-music of different tribes and peoples. However, much depends on the perspective adopted. The measuring rod of the musician must needs be differently graduated from that of the ethnologist.

For the following breath of fresh air let us be duly thankful (pp. 427-430):

What life is to the writer, and nature to the painter, unwritten music is to many a composer: a kind of mirror of genuineness and naturalness. Through it alone can we come to know something of the incalculable variety of man's instincts for musical expression. From it alone can we glean some insight into what suggests itself as being "vocal" to natural singers whose technique has never been exposed to the influence of arbitrary "methods." In the reiterated physical actions of marching, rowing, reaping, dancing, cradle-rocking, etc., that called its work-songs, dance-music, ballads and lullabies into life, we see before our very eyes the origin of the regular rhythms of our art-music and of poetic meters, and are also able to note how quickly these once so rigid rhythms give place to rich and wayward irregularities of every kind as soon as these bodily movements and gestures are abandoned and the music which originally existed but as an accompaniment to them continues independently as art for art's sake. In such examples as the Polynesian part-songs we can trace the early promptings of polyphony and the habits of concerted improvisation to their very source, and, since all composing is little else than "frozen inspiration," surely this latter experience is of supreme importance; the more so, if there again should dawn an age in which the bulk of civilized men and women will come to again possess sufficient mental leisure in their lives to enable them to devote themselves to artistic pleasures on so large a scale as do the members of uncivilized communities.

Then the spectacle of one composer producing music for thousands of musical drones (totally uncreative themselves and hence comparatively out of touch with the whole phenomenon of artistic creation) will no longer seem normal or desirable, and then the present gulf between the mentality of composers and performers will be bridged.

The fact that art-music has been written down instead of improvised has divided musical creators and executants into two quite separate classes; the former autocratic and the latter comparatively slavish. It has grown to be an important part of the office of the modern composer to leave as few loopholes as possible in his works for the idiosyncrasies of the performer. The considerable increase of exactness in our modes of notation and tempo and expression marks has all been directed toward this end, and though the state of things obtaining among trained musicians for several centuries has been productive of isolated geniuses of an exceptional greatness unthinkable under primitive conditions, it seems to me that it has done so at the expense of the artistry of millions of performers, and to the destruction of natural sympathy and understanding between them and the creative giants.

Perhaps it would not be amiss to examine the possible reason for the ancient tendency of cultured musicians gradually to discontinue improvisation, and seek some explanation for the lack of variety with regard to scales, rhythms and dynamics displayed by our western art-music when compared with the resources of

more primitive men in these directions. I believe the birth of harmony in Europe to have been accountable for much; and truly, the acquisition of this most transcendental and soul-reaching of all our means of musical expression has been worth any and every sacrifice. We know how few combinations of intervals sounded euphonious to the pioneers of harmonic consciousness, and can imagine what concentration they must have brought to bear upon accuracies of notation and reliability of matters of pitch in ensemble; possibly to the exclusion of any very vital interest in individualistic traits in performances or in the more subtle possibilities of dynamics, color and irregular rhythms.

With the gradual growth of the all-engrossing chord-sense the power of deep emotional expression through the medium of an unaccompanied single melodic line would likewise tend to atrophy; which perhaps explains why many of those conversant with the strictly solo performances of some branches of unwritten music miss in the melodic invention of the greatest classical geniuses—passionately as they may adore their masterliness in other directions—the presence of a certain satisfying completeness (from the standpoint of pure line) that may often be noticed in the humblest folk-song.

It always seems to me strange that modern composers, with the examples of Bach's Chaconne and Violin and 'Cello Sonatas as well as of much primitive music before them, do not more often feel tempted to express themselves extensively in single line or unison without harmonic accompaniment of any kind. I have found this a particularly delightful and inspiring medium to work in, and very refreshing after much preoccupation with richly polyphonic styles. Now that we have grown so skilful in our treatment of harmony that this side of our art often tends to outweigh all our other creative accomplishments, some of us feel the need of replenishing our somewhat impoverished resources of melody, rhythm and color, and accordingly turn, and seldom in vain, for inspiration and guidance to those untutored branches of our art that have never ceased to place their chief reliance in these elements. I have already referred to the possibilities of "inexact unison" evinced by Maori and Egyptian music. Similar rich and varied lessons might be learned from Red Indian, East Indian, Javanese, Burmese, and many other Far Eastern musics.

Being, moreover, the fortunate heirs to the results of those centuries of harmonic experiments in which ever more and more discordant combinations of intervals came to be regarded as concordant, we are now at last in a position from which we can approach such music as the Rarotongan part-songs and similar music of a highly complex discordant nature with that broad-minded toleration and enthusiastic appreciation which our painters and writers brought to bear on the arts of non-Europeans so many generations before our musicians could boast of an equally humble, cultured and detached attitude.

A broad-minded tolerance and an enthusiasm for the esthetic value of all that is genuine and distinctive in art, whether or not countenanced by academic sanction, are here united with a sure sense of history that, on the whole, seems rather uncommon among creative musicians.

I cannot close this already lengthy note without quoting from the last pages of the paper (pp. 433-434):

I believe the time will soon be ripe for the formation of a world-wide International Musical Society for the purpose of making all the world's music known to all the world by means of imported performances, phonograph and gramophone records and adequate notations. Quite small but representative troupes of peasant and native musicians, dancers, etc., could be set in motion on "world tours" to perform in the subscription concerts of such a society in the art-centers of all lands. One program might consist of Norwegian fiddling, pipe-playing, cattle-calls, peasant dances and ballad singing, another of various types of African drumming, marimba and zanze playing, choral songs and war dances, and yet another evening filled out with the teeming varieties of modes of singing and playing upon plucked string instruments indigenous to British India; and so on, until music lovers everywhere could form some accurate conception of the as yet but dimly guessed multitudinous beauties of the world's contemporaneous total output of music.

Quite apart from the pleasure and veneration such exotic arts inspire purely for their own sake, those of us who are genuinely convinced that many of the greatest modern composers . . . owe much of their contact with one kind or other of unwritten music, must, if we wish to behave with any generosity toward the future, face the fact that coming generations will not enjoy a first-hand experience of primitive music such as those amongst us can still obtain who are gifted with means, leisure or fighting enthusiasm. Let us therefore not neglect to provide composers and students to come with the best *second-hand* material we can. Fortunes might be spent, and well spent, in having good gramophone and phonograph records taken of music from everywhere, and in having the contents of these records noted down by brilliant yet painstaking musicians; men capable of responding to unexpected novelties and eager to seize upon and preserve *in their full strangeness and otherness* just those elements that have least in common with our own music. We see on all hands the victorious on-march of our ruthless western civilization (so destructively intolerant in its colonial phase) and the distressing spectacle of the gentle but complex native arts wilting before its irresistible simplicity.

Grainger's enthusiastic proposal doubtless meets with little more than a humorous smile from the average musician. To the ethnologist it opens up a vista full of interest and profit.

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#### REMOVING THE SKINS OF ANIMALS BY INFLATION

IN the summer of 1911 my Micmac informant described a method of removing the skins of animals which seemed to me novel, and, at the time, highly dubious. He stated that a small opening was made in the skin